My name is Marci Whittaker and I am a junior nuclear engineering student at Oregon State University in Corvallis, Oregon. I am here to speak about the necessity of an inspirational education.

I grew up in a small town in Eastern Oregon where education was not the top priority. In a small farming and lumber community, it is difficult to interest parents and children in the pursuit of knowledge when mills are closing and crops are failing.

However, I had an early advantage. Both of my parents graduated from college in scientific fields and were eager to encourage me in my education. They were receptive and supportive, even when I told them I wanted to be the first astronaut to be a judge and a professional basketball player.

By my freshman year at Oregon State, I was earnestly working towards a more general rocket scientist career. I discovered that a small group of OSU undergraduate students were putting together a project for NASA's Reduced Gravity Student Flight Opportunities Program. I was shocked. I didn't think that I would be able to participate in NASA programs until graduate school at least.

Participating in the Reduced Gravity Student Flight Opportunities Program has been a life changing experience. The program allows students to design and build experiments and test them in the zero gravity environment of the KC-135. Teams from community colleges to Ivy League universities converge on Ellington Field in Houston in the spring and summer to experience NASA at its finest.

I have now made three trips to Houston to take part in the RGSFO program, and each trip has been awe-inspiring. I could not hope to work for a better company. Every person I talked to was as excited to be there as the first day they worked there. Everyone involved was extremely conscientious about making sure that all of our questions were answered, whether it was about the program coordinator, the staff, interns we met in the hallways, or an astronaut we mobbed at the JSC campus. Any engineering or science buff would have a great time at NASA, but I haven't seen a group of students act this excited since the Christmas gift exchange in kindergarten.

The true genius of the RGSFO program is that this inspiration is passed from NASA to us, to high school and elementary students. A requirement of the program is that each team must speak about their experience to various groups upon returning home. For the OSU team, this has included speaking at high schools and elementary schools and putting together summer programs. I am now able to return to my very small high school and give the students the inspiration that I was lacking. The students who spoke of NASA in whispers now send me emails about how they are going to college so they can participate in this program, too.

As a nuclear engineering student at OSU, I am always hearing about nuclear space propulsion. My department chair, and avid supporter of space nuclear reactors, is also the director of the Oregon Space Grant Program. The National Space Grant College and Fellowship Program has also been a big force. Each year their scholarships get the whole department in a space uproar. Last year's scholarship essay asked the applicant to develop a task for a pico-satellite. For a solid month I heard nothing else but space talk.

I have been extremely lucky to be able to receive a Space Grant scholarship and participate in the Reduced Gravity Student Flight Opportunities Program. I am hoping that my

fourth year in college will be no less amazing.